

Youth, Revolt, Recognition

The Young Generation during and after the “Arab Spring”

Edited by Isabel Schäfer



The „Gezi Generation“: Youth, Polarization and the „New Turkey“

by Gözde Böcü

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The „Gezi Generation“: Youth, Polarization and the „New Turkey“

Gözde Böcü

A Turkish Summer

The Democratic Republic of Turkey, founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, became a multi-party system in the 1950s. Since then, Turkish democracy has been struggling to consolidate itself, facing major military coups in 1960, 1971 and 1980 to re-establish the elitist republican order, and has been coping with ethnic and religious polarization since the 1980s (Demirel 2005). After a decade of unstable coalition governments in the 1990s, the Islamic conservative party AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) came to power and has been leading the country for more than ten years (Aran 2013). The controversy about the AKP's party program and probable Islamic tendencies started in the aftermath of the elections in 2002. The liberal and secular parts of society especially assumed a sort of hidden Islamist agenda (Kurt & Alyanak 2011). After ten years of AKP rule it has become evident that it is not the Islamic agenda or the anti-republican stance, but rather the autocratic tendencies which represent the real problem (Tisdall 2013). In the last ten years the oppressive policies of the government seem to have incensed Turkish society more than expected, and eventually led to the democratic protest movement which started in Gezi Park in June 2013.

Gezi Park is a rare green area in the heart of Istanbul. When the government decided to use the Gezi Park area to build another shopping mall for the city, the inhabitants of Istanbul protested against this top-down decision. When police used excessive violence against the peaceful environmental protestors in and around the park in order to clear it, a widespread resistance against the police and the governmental measures arose (Kilic 2013). Such a wide protest as the summer 2013 protest against the AKP government had never been seen before in the history of the Turkish Republic. Previous protests had mainly been organized by the secular elite and were not widely successful, because until 2007 the majority of the people stood behind the policies of the AKP, believing that it would continue the democratization process and bring an end to the series of military coups in Turkey (Atay 2013).

More than a year after the protest the popular question “Quo vadis Turkey?” remains valid. What does the dominance of AKP in Turkish politics mean to the Gezi Generation and how can the increasing polarization of Turkish society be stopped? What role will young people play in the future and will they be able to influence mainstream politics in Turkey? This paper aims to provide an understanding of recent developments in Turkey by looking at the causes of the protest and increasing polarization within society, focusing mainly on the role of youth.

The Gezi Spirit

The protest's famous slogan, which spread all around the world in June 2013, developed out of the area where it took place: Gezi Park in Istanbul's Beyoglu District, next to Taksim Place. All protestors identified with the slogan “Everywhere is Taksim, Everywhere is resistance” when police forces cleared the area around Gezi Park in Istanbul (Kilic 2013). The events occurred after some environmentalists protested against plans to build a grand shopping mall, destroying one of Istanbul's rare green spaces. Until that day activists had been holding peaceful protests in a space in Gezi Park (Atay 2013). The park was filled with the activists' tents. Everyday more and more creative

protestors offered readings, gatherings and concerts and even cleaned up the rubbish produced by the visitors (Catterall 2013). On May 31, the police responded harshly to the peaceful demonstrations, firing tear gas at the protestors and beating them. These violent acts by the Turkish police were widely condemned by other organizations and institutions, and by the Council of Europe (Europe 2013). Thanks to the widespread coverage on Facebook and Twitter, with pictures circulating all over the internet, the protest turned into a mass movement (Dorsey 2013). Within several days people had started to pay more attention to the protests and participated directly on the streets of Istanbul. The streets of Beyoglu, an area popular with tourists, became the main arena for the clashes between the police and the people. Within a short time, more than 3.5 million people all over Turkey had taken to the streets to protest against the Turkish government's harsh measures against the peaceful demonstrators, whose aims were to fight for more democratic freedom and civil rights and to stop the repressive policies of the government (Özel 2014). The high number of injuries and the deaths of some protestors strengthened the uprising and made even more people come together (Ete 2013). In the final count, anti-government mass protests took place in 79 of Turkey's 81 regions, demonstrating the extent of the movement (Seufert 2013).

The Gezi movement was not only remarkable in its intensity but also because of the composition of its participants. For the first time in Turkish history, nearly all oppositional groups united around the same issue: Leftist, Kemalist, nationalist, pacifist, gay, anti-capitalist religious, Kurdish and Alevite groups demonstrated side by side on the streets (Aydın 2013). Their main purpose was to show their dissatisfaction with the government. Surveys conducted prior to the protest showed that almost 50% of Turkish citizens felt their lifestyle and freedoms to be under attack, believing the AKP to be pursuing a conservative agenda (Paul/Seyrek 2013). Another survey showed that only 10% of the protestors in the Gezi Movement were protesting for environmental reasons. The majority were there because of the increasing authoritarian and interventionist style of the government (Can 2013). Moreover, the protesters published their demands saying that they did not accept the imposition of religious or moral values or norms on society, and that they wished for a more participatory decision-making system in the environment of a pluralist system that also respects the demands of minorities (Werz 2013). The underlying motivation for protesting was not about the park but rather about the wish to be heard by an increasingly deaf government.

Why now?

It is not the first time in Turkish history that the group in power has ignored and suppressed the other. Looking at the causes of the Gezi Park protests from only a short-term perspective would hide the real causes of the unsolved tensions in Turkish society. Therefore it is important to take a closer look at the long-term causes of the biggest protest movement in Turkish history.

One of these long-term causes was the increasing polarization in Turkish politics and society: Turkish Society had faced polarization ever since the early years of the republic. Long before the conservative AKP-government came to power, Turkey struggled with increasing tension between different societal groups. When Atatürk and the state founders abolished the Caliphate and Sultanate in 1924, religious fraternities were banned and the secularist nation builders took over control of the state. Meanwhile, conservative parts of society, especially in rural areas remained unconvinced by the Kemalists calling on them to adopt a secular and western lifestyle. Over the decades, the unheard

voice of the Islamist and conservative parts of society turned into a huge political power source and into an opposing power base against the Kemalist set of ideas. The comeback of the Islamic social set of ideas started in the post-1980 military coup era, when conservative Turkish nationalism gained influence and the AKP consequently came to power in 2002 (Öncü 2014).

Some therefore argue that one major reason why the Gezi protest occurred was the long known struggle for power over the state and society between the secular and religious parts of society. In fact the composition of the protesters as well as their complaints against the government and Erdogan strengthen this argument. Some of the policies implemented by the AKP over the past number of years have been interpreted as being anti-secular and slightly conservative, therefore extending the gap between the conservatives and other parts of society. After a period of democratization under the leadership of Erdogan, the stance of the AKP, its politics, and the rhetoric of some key personalities in the party have changed dramatically (Prodromoua 2012). Starting from its second term in government, Erdogan and his party clashed with the old ideological basis of the Turkish state, beginning with the republican elite and other secular powers in the country such as the military. Over time the AKP managed to marginalize it and disable the opposition by means which were not always considered democratic. Some judicial cases such as Ergenekon and Balyoz arose, in which the state accused intellectual, bureaucratic, military and media people of planning a coup against the AKP government to eliminate it (Gürsoy 2012). Although in the beginning some parts of society such as leftist and Kurdish groups agreed to these trials because they only targeted the old Kemalist elite, all non-conservative parts of society would later feel their freedoms and lifestyle limited by the AKP.

The AKP government and its members, especially in the person of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, started to target the private lives of nearly all non-religious groups. When looking at the public statements of Erdogan between 2005 and 2013, we can clearly identify this kind of intervention. In most of his public statements, Erdogan targets the old elite by referring to abolishing symbols and important aspects of the traces of Atatürk in public life. Just before the protest started, for instance, he intended to change the name of the state bank T.C. Ziraat Bankasi by eliminating the prefix T.C. which stands for Turkish Republic and selling it to a foreign company (HürriyetDailyNews 2013). The secular elites saw this attempt as a symbolic fight against the Turkish Republic and its secular character. Another factor which angered not only the Kemalist part of society was that he called the founders of the Turkish state, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his friend Ismet İnönü “two drunks” (Yetkin 2013). As many people at least respect the memory of Atatürk as a state founder these words were highly insulting and angered not only the secular part of society, but the majority of Turkish people (Idiz 2013).

Erdogan has targeted not only the Kemalist part of society, but nearly all groups who do not share his values and world beliefs. On several occasions Erdogan managed to insult the religious stance of Alavites, criticized the drinking behavior of students and tried to dictate a new lifestyle for women in his speeches. His wish to press Turkish society into the frame of Islamic conservatism became evident when he announced his wish to raise a “religious generation (dindar genclik)” in 2012. Not only was his wish to educate future generations in Turkey, he also wanted half of society, namely women, to live in accordance with his and the AKP’s conservative mind set. In several speeches Erdogan and

other political figures of the AKP touched on the issue of women by telling them to have at least three children and that abortion would be considered murder very soon (Erdogan 2013). There exist many other examples from the last decade which easily illustrate how the AKP and Erdogan have increased the societal gap between its party and its supporters and other parts of society. Some even see a constant rise in the polarization of society in terms of secularism, religion and ethnicity from one electoral success of the party to another (Keyman 2014). Therefore we can speak of a gradual socio-political marginalization of the non-conservative parts of society in the past decade under the rule of the AKP as one of the long-term causes of the protest.

Capitalism, Conservative Bourgeoisie and Marginalization of Youth

While protest waves kicked off around the world in 2011, Turkish citizens were following the incidents in the Middle East, Greece and other parts of the world closely. However, by that time nobody predicted any similar movement in Turkey. For many years everything seemed under control: the military was brought under civil oversight, constitutional amendments were made according to the EU accession process and economic growth seemed unstoppable. Erdogan and his party were building successfully on Turkey's two-decade-long economic liberalization and were steadily raising the national income (Özel 2014). But with the AKP consolidating its position by centralizing and monopolizing power, a process started which led later to the Gezi movement and to a situation in which they became the victims of their own success. The economic boom mainly led to the rise of a new conservative bourgeoisie rather than to the establishment of a large middle class inclusive of and open to all parts of society. Some claimed that those who benefited most from the economic development under the AKP-rule were supporters of the government who gained power through the indirect patronage system (Aknur 2014). With the rule of law and many other state institutions under the monopoly of the AKP-government it seemed very unlikely for non-conservative parts of society to gain access to those somewhat state-controlled entities. Accordingly, some argue that this led to the socio-economic marginalization of the highly educated, more liberal, mainly young groups, and influenced their will to protest (Aknur 2014). Having analyzed some long-term factors, it can be argued that the government determined its own destiny by systematically marginalizing all non-conservative groups of society, economically, politically and socially. To understand the role, demands and composition of this marginalized group we have to take a look at the major player in the Gezi protest movement: the marginalized youth.

The "Gezi Generation"

Immediately after the protest the big question was: who are these people in Gezi Park? According to the government they were "extremists" or "terrorists". The government even encouraged conspiracy theories and claimed that the protestors were led by the so-called interest lobby or foreign forces who only wanted to harm Turkey and its thriving economy (Werz 2013). Scholars on the other hand assumed that the majority of the people who protested belonged to the middle class segments of Turkey, who had enjoyed a good education and who were internationally connected (Seufert 2013). Keeping in mind that those who died during the protest were all aged between 19 and 27 allows us to assume that it was the younger segment of society who protested. Even the group who started the protest Taksim Solidarity (Taksim Dayanismasi) on May 27 was mainly a group of university students who were brave enough to confront the policies of the Greater Istanbul Metropolitan

Municipality (Keyman 2014). These aspects allow us to raise the question of the role and participation of youth during the Gezi protest (Kulu 2013). Polls conducted during the protest showed that the average age of the people participating in the demonstrations was 28. Almost 50% of the protestors were under the age of 30 (KONDA 2014). Moreover, one in every four protestors was a student, thus strengthening the perception of a young movement in Gezi (Can 2013). One year after the protest we know more about the movement and its participants and are able to label the major group involved in the protest as young, urban, educated and non-ideological (Özel 2014). Therefore some started to speak of a “Gezi Generation”, characterized by a group of people who were younger than 30 and who were maybe born in the 1990s, mainly grew up during the rule of the AKP and who now resist this rule and the government’s wish to raise a religious generation (Atay 2013). Until the Gezi protests this societal group was invisible on the political stage and was considered to be uninterested in politics (Belge 2013). Young Turkish people became visible in the political arena when the Gezi protest broke out and when mainly youngsters lost their lives during clashes with the police, such as 21-year-old Ali Ismail Korkmaz. It was young people like him who turned into key figures for the young protestors while thousands of others were injured (Becatoros/Fraser 2013).

It was young people who made the difference during the Gezi protest especially when it came to taking part in the protests. One particularly important protest resource which only the youngsters could contribute to the protest was the use of social media. Looking at the new protest movements all around the world we can clearly identify the impact of social media on the protests in Egypt, Tunisia and Greece. Current research on the influence of social media during protests appear to validate this assumption. Della Porta and Mosca put forward the view that social media is one of today’s most important resources for the organization, implementation and success of a protest (Porta/Mosca 2005). Another major assumption in the literature is that social media have a high influence on the mobilization of participants for the protest. The use of social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter and other similar media not only to inform, but also to invite people to the protests increases the number of participants (Eltantawy/Wiest 2011). Other scholars emphasize an identity-forming role of social media. According to their view it is easier to create a communal spirit when interaction takes place on the streets as well as online (Garrett 2006).

Keeping a look at the use of those new communication technologies during the Gezi protest supports these theoretical assumptions. Firstly, over 35 million people in Turkey use the internet on a daily basis. Moreover Turkish people are the third largest national group on Facebook and most of them are younger users (Karabag/Coskun 2013). This shows how important the role of the internet in Turkey is and the potential of the resource that was lying in the hands of the protestors. Therefore, it is not a surprise that protesters used these social media resources during the protests to communicate, mobilize and inform each other about current developments. Some Twitter data analysis showed that the use of the internet and social media as such was an important tool for the Gezi revolt and that Twitter turned out to be the best tool for uprisings. It turned out that the vast majority of Turkish Twitter users used hashtags supportive of the protest, whereas only a small minority of Twitter users from Turkey supported the government on social media. Another important finding from the analysis was the regional distribution of hashtags: It was not the province of Istanbul

but the eastern province of Dersim where most “resist” hashtags were used (Champion 2013). This shows the considerable impact of social media in spreading the movement outside of the city of Istanbul (Dorsey 2013).

Apart from mobilizing and informing the protestors, another important impact of the use of social media during the protest was the identity-shaping of protesters through online media. With the utilization of social media came the spread of sarcastic comments and art about the government and especially about Erdogan himself. Laughing together meant solidarity for the youngsters. In a short time, young people developed new forms of protest (Dagli 2013). Some of these sarcastic pieces turned into nationwide resistance symbols, such as “the girl in the red dress” or “the standing man”. The distribution of these artistic symbols was especially effective on Twitter. The girl in the red dress was photographed during the very first days of the protest when a police officer gassed her without reason. Different artist tried to address this incident by reproducing it in different artistic mediums. Not only were the protestors caricatured but also pictures of the PM during his rallies in Ankara or Istanbul were sarcastically used by the social media community. For instance, the chequered jacket of the PM which he wore at a rally in Ankara, was not fashionable enough for the Gezi youth, and was seen as a symbol of the backwardness of the PM. Many other sarcastic works were influenced this (TEMPO 2013).

These are only some examples of the creative, sarcastic art pieces produced by young people and spread via social media to oppose the government. Keeping in mind that Turkish media suffer from state censorship and that many journalists are in jail due to their critical and investigative journalism, it is natural that youth used this tool. Moreover it can be argued that the social media environment was for a long time the only secure place left where youth could fight back without fearing any direct punishment by the state during the protests. We can therefore argue that the use of social media by young segments of society was unique and an important contribution to the protest. It clearly increased the mobilization of participants and helped to built up a common spirit for the protest. Given the centrality of this aspect during the Gezi protest, the role of social media and youth should not be underestimated for future perspectives on the development of Turkish democracy.

The Aftermath of the Gezi Protests

More than one year after the Gezi protests, not much is left from the initial Gezi Spirit and its Gezi Generation. According to some scholars, Gezi lacked the necessary momentum to become a fully bureaucratized movement because of the involvement of radical groups and the fact that the united groups went back to their old habits immediately after the protest. Although incidents such as the corruption scandal in December 2013 or the death of the youngest Gezi protestor Berkin Elvan 269 days after the protest meant a short re-awakening of the Gezi spirit, the movement never fully revived again (Inceoglu 2014).

The electoral process starting in March 2014 marked the end of the Gezi movement and the making of extra-institutional politics in Turkey. With mainstream political parties re-entering the political stage, extra-institutional claims were no longer valid. The illusion or the hope that challenging the authoritarianism of the AKP by campaigning and voting was still possible hindered the preservation and the maintenance of Gezi (Inceoglu 2014). When the political campaigns started, some were

hoping for the emergence of new politicians or leaders from the Gezi Generation. In fact, a “Gezi Party” was founded in October 2013 aimed at influencing the political process. It was supported by a mixture of young and old, left-wing and conservative mainly university students and led by the neo-classical metal musician Resit Cem Köksal (Aknur 2014). After the outcome of the March 2014 local elections all hopes that the Gezi Party might play a role for the future of Turkey disappeared: Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his party won the elections and remained in power (Carkoglu 2014). After the local elections people opposing the government hoped that at least the presidential elections might show a better outcome. Most of them did not believe that the polarizing figure of Recep Tayyip Erdogan would persuade the majority of Turkey. Despite everything, Erdogan was elected President of the Turkish Republic on 10 August 2014 by a large majority of the votes (Seufert 2014). According to observers the recent electoral success and the dominance of the AKP for the last seven elections marked the end of pluralist democracy and finally also of Gezi (Keyman 2014).

Nonetheless, underestimating the future role of the Gezi movement and youth by reviewing its impact only by looking at electoral outcomes would be wrong. The success of Gezi and the impact of the Gezi Generation should not be reduced only to these electoral outcomes, but should be reconsidered from different perspectives. Although the Gezi protests could not be translated into the institutional sphere, its major achievement was that helped the marginalized parts of society, especially the socio-economically marginalized youth, to overcome their fears and to resist the government. The Gezi protests also achieved the revitalizing of civil society: during and after the Gezi protest, various old and new organizations, many led by young activists, came together to influence mainstream politics. For instance the establishment of an organization called “Vote and Beyond (Oy ve Ötesi)” which aimed to prevent fraud during the local elections by assigning a volunteer for each ballot box attracted public attention (Inceoglu 2014). These are only some aspects which illustrate the change brought about in Turkish society and politics by the protest movement in the summer of 2013.

Is Winter Coming?

Although different scenarios for the future of Turkey are debated it seems very likely that the polarization between the different sets of society will steadily increase. Erdogan has taken no step back since the Gezi protest and it is very unlikely that he will do so in the future. Analyses have shown that with every step consolidating his power, his politics has become more and more polarizing. In Erdogan’s personal utopia, which he terms “New Turkey”, there is apparently no place for those who do not accept his definition of democracy (Seufert 2014). Criticism, checks and balances and participatory democracy seemed to have no place in the New Turkey. In fact for the first time in history, Turkey is not only facing the risk of being polarized but also of becoming a more and more divided society (Keyman 2014). Keeping the general political situation of Turkey in mind, Turkish youth and those who see themselves as part of the Gezi Generation will have to prepare for difficult times. Social media have been and will be one of the only free tool available to young people. However, remembering several attempts by the government to shut down YouTube and turn off Twitter, we can see that freedom of speech does not appeal to the President and his perception of a New Turkey either. Additional repressive measures or the closure of access to social media may

further complicate this situation. Nevertheless, as long as young people keep organizing and as long as social media is available, there is still some hope and it is called the “Gezi Generation”.

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